



High praise for vigilance

Sudesh Kissun

A SENIOR United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) veterinarian believes New Zealand is among the best prepared to deal with a disaster or disease outbreak.

Sebastian Heath says the extensive biosecurity programme involving key government agencies reflects the high state of preparedness.

“Any successful response and recovery operation is not an issue for a single discipline and must involve everyone,” he says.

Heath, who is attached with the USDA’s animal and plant health inspection service, was in Auckland last week to address a regional conference of vets.

He commended New Zealand for acquiring BSE-free status from the Organisation of Animal Health (OIE).

“It’s a great accomplishment and good role model for other countries to see how it can be done,” he says.

However, he warned against complacency.

Heath points out that the Avian Flu was still developing and the risk of it spreading to the Pacific region was unknown.

“Who knows how and when it will appear but plans have been put

in place by countries to be prepared and respond,” he says.

Heath also cautioned against focusing on the Avian Flu and believes countries should use it for “general preparedness”.

“By focusing on one

disease there’s a concern that as the general interest wanes on that particular disease, people got bored and it turns out not as bad as we thought.

“Avian Flu should be seen as part of a number of threats out there like other strains of the Avian Flu plus new and emerging diseases in humans and animals.”

Heath noted New Zealanders “generally seemed cognisant” that the agriculture sector was the backbone of

export receipts.

According to Heath, in many countries people were concerned on the impact of agriculture on the environment during times of disasters like earthquakes and floods.

Agriculture is becoming increasingly intensive around the world but the public doesn’t always perceive that “as the most desirable effect on the environment”.

“When the disaster strikes, the question is will the public say that

Tuesday, 06 June 2006, p. 12